

THE PITTSBURGH I REMEMBER IS A CITY THAT WILL USE THIS ACT OF HATE TO BUILD A PLACE OF LOVE AND HOPE

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I remember the old Pittsburgh, the grimy city of steel mills and pollution, a lunch pail-carrying kind of place where the sweat of the blast furnaces was washed away with a shot and a beer. I remember a fiercely proud area that viewed Eastern Pennsylvania as another state, perhaps even another country. Pittsburgh, Western Pennsylvania, even has its own language.

Phrases such as: “What yinz doin’ after you red up the house?” clang on the outsider’s ear like the wail of a car alarm at 3 in the morning. My mother, who worked as a welder from 7 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. and then as a cleaning woman in an office from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., said of Eastern Pa.: “They’re from the anthracite region; we’re from the bituminous region,” as if that was a stamp you’d get on your passport.

My father drove a ladle crane in about every mill in Western Pa. and Eastern Ohio as the steel industry was dying. United Engineering. Mesta Machine. Youngstown Sheet & Tube, Sharon Steel, Jones & Laughlin and finally Pennsylvania Engineering in our hometown of New

Castle, 50 miles from Pittsburgh. That's where he was working when he died at the age of 45, the life sucked from him by relentlessly hard work.

When I was a kid the Interstate hadn't been built yet and the drive to Pittsburgh to see a Pirates game at Forbes Field was an arduous affair, following a windy road that traced the river. On the way home the night sky was lighted by the flames of the mills, red and yellow thrown into the pitch black and my Dad would always say: "It's so late even the Drakes ducks are asleep," referring the logo of Drakes Cakes, maker of Devil Dogs, Ring Dings and other delicacies.

Forbes Field was a grand old ballpark that, if it had lasted another 10 years, would still exist as an icon of the game, like Fenway Park or Wrigley Field. It was wonderfully asymmetrical and over the left-field fence you'd see Schenley Park, which separates Oakland, where Forbes Field was, from Squirrel Hill, where the Tree of Life Synagogue was turned into a killing field of death on Oct. 27. I've thought of those drives to Pittsburgh a lot since the attack.

Pittsburgh had several advantages on other Rust Belt cities, chiefly being that it had to deal with twin disasters much earlier than other tired, old mill towns – pollution and a dying economy. And it has dealt with them brilliantly, reinventing itself into a clean, gorgeous community in which the economy is now driven by

banking, medical, education and high tech industries instead of steel.

Pittsburgh also had to deal with the complexities of a very diverse community. As the steel industry grew in the latter 1800s, the traditional French, English, Irish and Scottish settlers were joined by immigrant workers needed to staff the mines and mills – Eastern Europeans, Italians, Syrians and, from the Southern United States, African-Americans.

There has long been a very vibrant Jewish community in Pittsburgh that was well aware of its immigrant roots and in 1881, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) was formed to help Jewish immigrants resettle. Now, it helps immigrants from all over the world who are looking for a better life or to escape repression. That work was one of the reasons a bigot spewing anti-Semitic hate murdered 11 people praying in a house of worship.

The Pittsburgh I remember was not without its bigotry, to be sure. But it always dealt with things in an in-your-face kind of way. I remember one of my Dad's friends using the N word and I remember my Mom throwing him out of the house. She worked with black people; they were her friends and she would not stand for that ignorance and intolerance.

Sports always helped bridge the differences in Pittsburgh. From when I was 5 years old until I was 22, the right fielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates was Roberto Clemente, an enormously proud black man from Puerto Rico. He was adored. He played baseball the way they worked in the mills, giving an honest day's effort every time he put on the black and gold uniform.

One of the centerpieces of the four Super Bowl titles the Pittsburgh Steelers won from 1974-80 was Franco Harris, whose father was African-American and mother Italian. Clemente and Harris, through their success, hard work and community work, helped bridge many differences in the City of Bridges. They helped take Pittsburgh from what it was to what it is.

The long-time radio and TV announcer for the Steelers was Myron Cope, a Jew from Squirrel Hill who peppered his play-by-play with Yiddish expressions that, even when you didn't understand them, brought a smile. Cope created The Terrible Towel and signed over profits from it to the Allegheny Valley School, which cares for people with mental and physical disabilities.

That's the kind of place Pittsburgh is. People look out for each other. Yes, Pittsburgh is not the same city I remember from growing up there. If you were forming the Steelers today they'd be named the Bankers or the Doctors or the Techno Geeks. But that's just what you see on the outside. Inside, the heart is still the same. This was a city slapped around by temperature

inversions, smog and a runaway economy that took the mills where it could find cheaper labor.

But it bounced back. Pittsburgh has reinvented itself brilliantly without losing that beating heart that pumps out hard work and quietly screams for fairness. Squirrel Hill is not a wound that will heal easily or quickly. But just as it did when the mills left, Pittsburgh will emerge as a stronger, better place. And maybe in that way it will raise up all of America. It's a part of the country I'm proud to be from.